



HISTORY OF THE MOMENCE GLADIOLUS FESTIVAL

By: Kay Hess - 1955

The annual Momence Gladiolus Festival is the out-growth of three seemingly unrelated facts. In 1934 Momence celebrated its one-hundredth birthday, the first of the towns of this area to attain the lofty stature of being able to commemorate a centennial. Practically every citizen of the town contributed their time and talent as a member of the committee. There were parades and floats, bands, displays of antiques, and a pageant of Momence history. The city had never seen such crowds of people on its streets, and everyone in the town of Momence had a feeling of having worked together in the pride of accomplishment. They felt that a celebration would be a good thing to have every year, for they had found themselves capable of providing entertainment that would attract visitors to the community.

South of Momence is an area of farmland, flat and reminiscent of the lowlands of Holland, or so it seemed to the Dutch and French residents on the farms there. The soil was ideal for truck farming and, as it turned out, for flowers. When one of the farmers tried some gladiolus bulbs as an experiment, the results were so good that others soon followed his examples. Before long, thousands of spikes were finding their way to the markets every day from the hundreds of acres of flowers near Wichert and Momence. Momence people knew that gladiolus was grown there, but none had ever thought particularly of sharing the beauty of the field with those who lived elsewhere.

A visit to a flower festival in a neighboring state was the catalyst that brought the Centennial and the fields into a relationship.

The flowers and the trip were fine, but the festival visitor wanted more hospitality and entertainment. And an idea began to germinate, Momence had acres and acres of beautiful flowers; the town had shown itself capable of hosting thousands of people. Why not have a flower festival of our own, a Gladiolus Festival?

The Chamber of Commerce seemed the logical place for an idea to be put before others, that it might materialize. So it was that Roy G. Hess presented the dream of a Gladiolus Festival at a Chamber meeting in 1937. The members of the Chamber accepted the plan wholeheartedly and then began the work and interest of hundreds of Momence people, who have been part of the festivals down through the years.

It took planning, organization, time, and toil-lots of toil on the part of all concerned. Many workers have given over a thousand hours to make the festival what it is today. Warren Holmes, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and publisher of the Momence Record, was one of the enthusiastic backers of the festival in that formative year. Another ardent supporter of the plan was Russell France, then President of the Chamber. A board of directors was formed, and the first festival administrative group was elected. They were R. E. France, President; Mrs. Geo. Fox, secretary; Elmer Deliere, treasurer; Grace France, Dorothy Ruge, Richard Blankenstyn, C.C. Sherwood, Earl DuFrain, J.B. Stout, Arnold Sherwood, and W.M. Homes, directors.

For that first festival in 1938, the Wichert growers gave Momence 524,000 bulbs. Citizens planted bulbs along the curbs, gardens, and vacant lots. The Woman's Club planned a flower show, which was to be the start of the beautiful shows which are so much part of each year's festival.

The first several celebrations were held on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The program for the first festival was made up of the following.

Flower Show in the Community Building
Antique Displays
Floral Parade in the afternoon
Band Concert in the late afternoon
Historical Pageant in the evening, on the Island and the Kankakee River

Saturday's program was the same, except that a children's parade was added. Each church held special services on Sunday, the flower and antique shows were open, the parade took place, and a band review was on the Island. Sunday was, by far, the biggest day of the celebration.

There was a Queen crowned too, and she and her attendants ruled over that first festival in 1938, as Queens have done each year successively since.

And did people come to Momence for that first festival? Well, the Centennial crowds of 1934 were small compared to the people who thronged the streets for three days in August of 1938. President France and the Board agreed that a fine start had been made, but they also realized that the festival would grow into an undertaking far too large for the Chamber of Commerce to handle. Shortly after that first festival, letters were sent to every organization in town requesting that a representative be sent from each group. These representatives met in the American Legion rooms and voiced their opinions. As a result of several meetings, the Momence Gladiolus Festival Association was formed, and officers and directors were elected for the ensuing year. And so, the festival passed from the Chamber of Commerce to the Festival Association, stipulating in the by-laws that a certain percentage of the Board should be made up of growers. This method of festival management continues today, but the Board has grown from eleven to thirty members.

Some changes in the festival's format have occurred since that first year. At first, the festival took place on the downtown streets, the Island, and the River, and some attractions were even held on a farm outside of town. As the crowds increased each year, so did traffic problems, and it became more feasible to have the celebration on the beautiful grounds of the high school on the west side of town as much as possible. The boat pageant, a feature of past festivals, came and went. During the first few years, there were afternoon and evening programs. The afternoon programs have become a thing of the past. Sunday, the big day of the first few years, was eliminated as a festival day. And Festivals now begin on Thursday and culminate in Saturday's program.



MEN OF VISION. Pictured here is the Gladiolas Festival Committee of 1941. From left to right are (first row) president W. W. Therien and vice president Edgar Bonvallet; (second row) vice president Roy G. Hess, treasurer Elmer Deliere, and secretary Arnold Sherwood. Hess was an early visionary of the festival after attending the Tulip Festival in Michigan with his wife, Kay. (Courtesy of the Momence Historical House.)

During the War, when such festival necessities as paper and gasoline were at a premium, there was much discussion about whether the celebration should be dropped. But William Therien, then President, fought hard to keep the festival alive. He, with other members of the Board, felt that once halted, it would be difficult to resume. So, during those hard years, there was a flower show, a carnival, and a little entertainment.

Today, the Queen is elected by popular vote. Except for the year 1941, the Queen has always been a Wichert or Momence girl. In 1941, girls from surrounding towns were asked to compete. In recent years a Gladiolus Princess has also been chosen to reign over the kid's parade and to assist the Queen in presiding over festival activities.

For some years, there have been memberships sold in the Festival Association. At present, there are over a hundred members. Each member pays a ten-dollar fee each year, or fifteen dollars, if he wishes to have his place of business decorated with flags or bunting.

At the end of each year, a meeting is held. Those holding memberships attend, and from this group, officers and board members are elected to carry on the festival for the coming year as it has from the beginning. Momence each year needs the co-operation of every one of its townspeople and growers, the high quality of entertainment that the festival provides for the hundred thousand visitors who come here to enjoy the parades, the bands, the color-and above all, the wondrous flowers in the shows, on the floats, and in the fields.

As time goes on, traditions develop. The kids' parade has grown and grown. The Friday night firework display is another with its myriad colors and flowers in light. The Drum and Bugle Corp's arrival on Saturday is awaited by parade goers each year, their flash, precision, and incomparable music. And the floats! In 1934, that Centennial year, Tallman Brothers built the first all-glad float and set a precedent for all the floats. Floats constructed of thousands of gladiolus have been featured in every parade since and have become renowned all over the United States for their loveliness and originality.



1934 Centennial Celebration - Tallman Float

Today, the Annual Gladiolus Festival is known nationwide. Guests arrive each August from the length and breadth of the United States and foreign countries. This is known as the largest gladiolus-growing region in the world. Newspapers and magazines everywhere publish articles and pictures of the festival. Indeed, Momence can be proud of its growers, flowers, and itself for creating and maintaining a festival of beauty and high quality.

And now, let us have a glimpse at the festivals past.

In 1938, Russell France, the President, was the guiding spirit. Momence was a little surprised to see what he had wrought, a magnificent parade, a pageant along the Kankakee River, with two-hundred people in the cast. There was the antique show, and the old community hall housed the ancestor of all flower shows. And people? Momence was crowded. Our town had something! This was a BIG thing and would get BIGGER. How to manage it? From an Association to a Gladiolus Festival Association!

1939 came. There was an association to plan and work. And someone saw the possibilities presented by the acres of lawn around the high school building. So, that year the festivals began to claim this lovely lawn as home ground, and the high school building had a purpose other than education; it housed the flower show for the first time. Two other innovations came that year, a boat pageant with its flower-decked entries on the River and a fireworks entertainment planned just for Momence pyrotechnic Indians, windmills (for the Dutch origin of both our bulbs and many of our growers), and glads in colors of fire. We were beginning to grow! And more people had heard of Momence and those acres of glads.

When we think of 1940, we should also listen quietly; there should come an echo of martial music, a bugle's blare, or a drum tattoo. That was the year drums, and bugles began the tradition that we have come to love so well. The parades were more significant, the music was finer, and there were even more people. And besides the parades, boat pageant, and fireworks, there was a rodeo to lend more excitement to the Momence scene.

That was a political year, and the citizens and visitors got a good look at all the aspirants and heard their beliefs and promises. We had a new festival president that year, Mr. William Therien, who was destined to guide the association for the next five years.

1941 marked a waypoint. The crowd that came to Momence did not know that this year's fun and beauty would be the last big show for a while.

Few people had heard of Pearl Harbor, Hickam Field, and Bataan. And anyway, those were just placenames out in the Pacific. And the present was real; Englewood, Cornwall, Gladstone, Berwyn, those were places we knew. And they all sent drum and Bugle corps to thrill us with the show's music. There were the boys from the Police Post, the Board of Trade, and Logan Square. The school children had a particular part of the flower show, and there was an exhibit by the Junior Vocational and 4-H Clubs. The kids were represented in another way too, for then was born the Kids' Parade, the prettiest, the queerest, the most ridiculous looking kids we'd ever seen. And scores of Junior American Legion Baton Twirlers competed for medals, while softball teams from neighboring cities and towns battled for a one-hundred-dollar prize. That year was a wonderful festival: excitement, fun, noise, color, and gorgeous flowers.

But 1942 came, and now everybody knew about Pearl Harbor, Hickman Field and Bataan, and many other places that weren't just names. They were places where Johnny, Bill, and Jim fought so that we at home could continue to be ourselves and have such things as celebrations, grow glads, and watch kids parade in clown suits and hula skirts. There were no parades, fireworks, or stirring sound of the bugles and drums. Some wanted to forget that festival time was here. Others thought seeing the flowers and the children in the parade might bring peace to troubled minds and hearts. So, we kept on in a small way to be sure; that the festival did not die out.

1943, '44, and '45 was all the same. There were victories in those far-away places, but there were defeats too. But some way, planning a flower show and dressing the children in their funny costumes

made a normal spot in a world that was out of kilter.

Being President of the association in those years was a task indeed. And but for the determination of Mr. Therien and 1945 of Mr. Edgar Inslee, who then became the leader, there would not be a festival today. Someone has said that the one sentence in the world which is always true is in the Bible. That sentence says, "And this, too, shall pass." Good times and bad, joys and troubles, yes, even wars.

In 1945 the association became even stronger, for during this season, memberships in the Momence Gladiolus Festival Association were sold. And thus began a new policy. In a way, those memberships were a mark of faith, a sign that things would be all right again someday.

In 1946 there was gasoline and paper again, and the boys were home. Parades were lawful, and we had a wonderful one! Do you remember the wedding cake, complete with the bride and groom? Can you still see hundreds of rosy glads which made the hoop-skirted lady who skimmed magically down the street? There was still a hint of War, for the North Dixie Businessmen won a prize with a float depicted in blue and gold glads, the splendor of a service button. And do you remember the jolly tar who dunked himself in the drink of the Kankakee River from the insecurity of a rubber life-raft? And fireworks and the drill teams and the bands were back and even more glamorous. Our President was new too, Arnold Sherwood, who was to preside for three good years.

Thousands and thousands of people came here every summer to glorify the gladiolus. And "still the wonder grew." In 1947, the comment came, "This thing is getting almost too big to handle." But some way, like the farmer who could lift the cow because he began lifting when the cow was yet a calf, Momence found herself capable. And speaking of that cow, do you remember the prize-winning on the Milk Co-op float? That year, the flower show was based on the Four Seasons. And Porters sailed into first place in the parade with a floral boat. Some two-hundred baton twirlers from Indiana and Illinois competed here for prizes.



Momence Milk Co-op Float

The window decorating competition came into being in 1948. Overnight, windows that had the day before displayed life's necessities now became pictures of floral beauty. And so, the customs continued, and new ones were added, and the festival became an event to be counted on, like Christmas and Thanksgiving. And everyone still plans, sews, hammers, builds, and sketches, and gets tired but feels pleased and proud.

In 1949, Governor Stevenson proclaimed. "This well-established annual fete affords the public an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of broad flowering fields and carefully tended gardens in one of the world's greatest gladiolus growing regions."

The registry book read like a roll call of the states. The kids elected a Princess that year. And new varieties of glads were shown for the first time, Caleria, Spotlight, New Europe, and the beloved Silver Wings. That year, Earl Reising became festival president and gave us two great years of leadership.

1950 marked the reception of the largest crowds in festival history, and it was a year that instead provided a standard for future festivals to meet. In the years past, the festival had grown, but so had the town itself, and it had become an even better place to live. The festival had never been, nor never will be a commercial and money-making venture. It will always be a tribute to flowers, beauty, and time taken from a humdrum world to honor beauty.

Clarence Crawford, then superintendent of the Momence schools, took over the presidency in 1951 and served well that year and the next. He was succeeded by Harry Heninger, who headed the association for 1953 and '54. The festival has continued in these later years to grow and grow. More equipment has been added each year with association funds so visitors may be made more comfortable, and the programs may be presented more effectively. The town devotes itself to its guests and their entertainment for three days each year.





Sources:

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